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# After the ayatollah



## The mayhem in Iran could turn into civil war

Things could be worse in Iran, and may well become so. That may seem a remarkable thing to say after this autumn's guerrilla outbreaks, which on October 15th claimed another prominent victim in Ayatollah Ashrafu-Isfahani, the central government's proconsul in western Iran; after the renewed fighting in Kurdistan, which is said to have cost 300 lives in the past week; after a year in which some 12,000 people have been executed for political reasons and another 20,000 have been jailed in Bastille-like conditions; and after Ayatollah Khomeini has just rejected another appeal to end the Gulf war, which is modestly reckoned to have cost more than 50,000 lives.

Yet post-Khomeini Iran is getting nearer, and it looks like being even blacker than the Iran he has given Iranians already. The 82-year-old reaper of Iran's revolutionary whirlwind is now too ill to leave his home in northern Teheran. The continued resistance by left-wing Mujaheddin guerrillas in the face of such savage repression is evidence of the hatred many Iranians now feel for the ruling mullahs. The few westerners who are allowed into Iran speak of the hostility of most middle-class Iranians—and particularly of the chador-swathed women—for a regime which has deprived them of most of the good things in life. The country's large shopkeeper class blames the government for the empty pockets of its customers. The urban working class is no supporter of a regime which has brought half of industry to a standstill. That leaves the mullahs with little more than the backing of illiterate ex-peasants who trekked to the cities in search of jobs during the Shah's industrial revolution, and who are now subsidised to act as Ayatollah Khomeini's *sans-culottes*.

Revolutionary terror and the support of a mob will probably not be enough to keep the mullahs in power when Ayatollah Khomeini dies. The spiritual authority of Iran's leader derives from his prestige as one of the country's five "grand ayatollahs". His chosen successor, Ayatollah Montazeri, does not belong to this charmed circle. The other grand ayatollahs are elderly traditionalists who have long grumbled about Ayatollah Khomeini and want to stay above politics.

Ayatollah Montazeri and his followers, on the other hand, want to stay in the political kitchen—and reach for the red-pepper pot. These left-wing clerics wish to expropriate medium-sized farms and to nationalise much of industry and trade. They favour closer economic links with the Soviet Union. Some argue that Marx and Lenin were heirs of the message of equality preached in the Koran; even that Allah is the same as the people.

The crack between conservatives and radicals now opening at the top of the mullah hierarchy could fissure all the way down Iranian society. The opposition

Mujaheddin could split too, between those who want to get the clergy out of politics at all costs and those who support the collectivist ideas of Ayatollah Montazeri. Iran's pro-Soviet Communist party, the Tudeh, is already a camp-follower of the left-wing mullahs. The party is small, but its supporters have burrowed their way into senior jobs in many Iranian ministries.

On the other side of the Iranian political divide, the hope of the Iranian middle classes is the army. The soldiers would make powerful allies for those elderly ayatollahs who want to return to the prayer mats. Iranian officers today make little secret of their contempt for the preachers who want to stay on as their political masters. The generals have regained their self-respect in the war against Iraq. So long as the war continues, the soldiers seem unlikely to turn their attention to politics. Should the conflict fizzle out in exhausted stalemate, the soldiers' hands will be freed.

### Into the black hole

The numbers, and fanaticism, on both sides of the post-Khomeini divide look like a prescription for civil war. Such a war could draw in outside powers. Russia has long been musing thoughtfully on Iran's northern border. At least 1,500 Soviet advisers have percolated into Iran since the fall of the Shah. The Russians have up to 24 divisions along the border; it seems unlikely that they are there to deter an Iranian attack.

If the Russians were to take the admittedly huge risk of intervening on behalf of the radical mullahs, the United States would almost certainly have to help their opponents. The swallowing by Mr Brezhnev of this country of more than 40m people, which stands between him and the Gulf, would make the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan look like an appetiser. The scene would then be set for yet another proxy war between the superpowers over the suffering body of a third-world country.

There is one slender hope that Iran can dodge between the depressing alternatives of civil war and collectivist drudgery. The hope is that the army can at the right moment organise a swift, conclusive coup like the one which brought the Shah's father to power 60 years ago. That anyone should consider this desirable shows how far opinion has swung back since the Shah was forced out in 1979. Many western-educated idealists in Iran—ranging from the Shah's last prime minister, Mr Shahpur Bakhtiar, to the ayatollah's first president, Mr Abolhassan Bani-Sadr—believed that western-style democracy was possible in Iran. Their voices have been blown away on the winds of unreason sweeping the country. The Shah made many mistakes; his conviction that only a strong government could save Iran from itself was not one of them.